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ABSTRACT

This study examined the reactions and feelings of students and their parents in regard to the nonpromotion experience. Families from four different school districts with children who had been retained at least once in grades one through eight were selected for the study. A total of 52 individuals from 22 families participated in 46 separate, qualitative interviews. It was found that the retention philosophy of the individuals participating in the study was built around two main issues: (1) if and when a retention should occur; and (2) whether or not retention "helps" or "hurts" a child. All of the respondents expressed a belief in the necessity of grade level retention, although this belief did not necessarily translate into an endorsement of the retention decision affecting their own family. Most parents, however, did report a belief that nonpromotion had aided the progress of their own child in school. The retained students generally echoed the same belief. Contains 26 references. (MDM)

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Adapting to Retention:
A Qualitative Study Revealing the Retention Philosophy of Nonpromoted Students and Their Parents

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to uncover the feelings and reactions of students and their parents in regard to the nonpromotion experience. Families with children who had been retained at least once in grades one through eight were purposefully selected as units of study from one of four area school systems. A total of 52 family members from 22 family units participated in 46 separate, qualitative interviews. The information collected from the interviews was inductively analyzed. Building upon Schlossberg's theory for human adaptation to transitions, several factors emerged from the data that affected the adaptation of a parent or a student to a grade level retention. This presentation will discuss one of the those factors--retention philosophy. The retention philosophy of the individuals participating in the study was built around two main issues, if and when a retention should occur and whether or not retention "helps" or "hurts" a child. Surprisingly, all of the respondents expressed a belief in the necessity of the practice of grade level retention; this belief did not necessarily translate into an endorsement of the retention decision affecting their own family. Most parents, however, did report a belief that nonpromotion had aided the progress of their own child in school. The retained students generally echoed this same belief.

Adapting to Retention:
A Qualitative Study Revealing the Retention Philosophy of Nonpromoted Students and Their Parents

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of nonpromotion on the family. With an estimated 2 out of every 30 students being retained annually, administrators are faced with retention decisions on a fairly significant percentage of students in their schools (Shepard & Smith, 1990). In fact, decisions concerning nonpromotion are among the most important decisions a school administrator will ever make (Bucko, 1986). In the United States, the nonpromotion of academically weak students is rooted in a tradition dating back to the 19th century graded school (Bucko, 1986; Cunningham & Owens, 1976). By the early 1900s, nearly one out of every two students was retained, and as many as 70% were over-aged (Walker, 1984).

The 20th century ushered in the progressive movement and retention rates dropped accordingly; by the 1930s, the combination of social promotion and tracking became the more accepted practice for working with weaker students (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). The practice of retention continued to decline during the 1950s and 1960s although exact retention figures were impossible to calculate because many states did not require local systems to collect or to

report data on nonpromotion of students (Bucko, 1986).

Despite overwhelming evidence that retention does not improve student achievement (Holmes, 1983, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975), the trend towards minimum competency testing in the 1970s and the excellence in education movement of the 1980s has invigorated the practice of retention (Shepard & Smith, 1989; Toch, 1984). The current, annual retention rate in the United States is gauged to be approximately 6% with an estimated 50% of all entering students expected to experience nonpromotion at least one time before entering high school (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Although a considerable body of research is available on the effect nonpromotion has on the achievement and the affect of children retained, very little research has been conducted on the effects of retention on the family and on the home-school relationship. Educators realize the family is a critical element in school success. Researchers report positive findings on widely varying types of parent involvement activities (Becher, 1985; Cotton & Savard, 1982; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Walberg, 1984). Several federally funded programs contain components designed to promote family involvement (Epstein, 1991), and many individual school systems are developing innovative parent-school partnerships (D'Angelo & Adler, 1991; Chrispeels & Meaney,

1985; Davies, 1991; Epstein, 1991; Warner, 1991).

The family forges an important link in school success, yet researchers have not explored the effect retention has on the family unit and on the relationship between home and school. The purpose of this study was to uncover the feelings and reactions of students and their parents in regard to the effect the nonpromotion experience has on the family unit and on the relationship between the home and the school.

Methodology

Families with children who had been retained at least once in grades one through eight were purposefully selected as units of study from one of four area school systems in Northeast Tennessee. Fifty-two family members from 22 families participated in 46 separate, qualitative interviews. The interviews were tape recorded, and the tapes were transcribed by a professional typist. The information collected was inductively analyzed. The process of data analysis included data reduction, unitization, categorization, and verification. Through the analysis of the interviews, the investigator uncovered the feelings and reactions of family members concerning the nonpromotion of at least one child within the family.

Participants

This section contains a compilation of data describing

the educational and economic characteristics of the 22 family units selected for this study. All of the families lived in Northeast Tennessee, and in all but one family, the parents had also been reared in this same region. Four of the families had children attending Bristol City Schools; five of the families had children attending Unicoi County Schools; six of the families had children attending Elizabethton City Schools; and seven of the families had children attending Washington County Schools. Within the 22 families, a total of 27 children had been retained; three of the students had been retained twice. Two of the family units were African-American.

At the time of the interviews, 13 of the family units were intact with the biological mother and father married to one another. Five of the families were reconstructed families with step-parents actively involved in family life. Four of the families were headed by a single mother. The number of children per family unit ranged from one to eight.

Only two of the parents in the study had earned a college degree while thirteen parents had dropped out of junior high or high school. This fairly low level of educational attainment was reflected in the equally low economic earning power of the families studied; surprisingly, however, only one parent was unemployed at the

time of the interviews. The majority of the families had parents who were employed in blue collar jobs. At least eight of the units were two income families. The father in one family was in retirement while another father was staying at home on a disability income.

Adapting to Retention: A Process of Transition

The families profiled in the previous section all experienced crisis related to the nonpromotion of at least one child within the family unit. Through the interview process family members often described feelings of prolonged frustration surrounding a crisis precipitated by a child's academic difficulties prior to a retention. Some participants related feelings of bitterness and helplessness over the retention decision itself. In addition, many of the families were under the influence of other life stressors such as divorce, illness, or relocation prior to the nonpromotion experience.

Transition and Adaptation

Schlossberg traces the growth of transition theory from crisis theory. Rather than use the term crisis, however, Schlossberg (1984) prefers to use the term transition when discussing "any event or nonevent that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles within the settings of self, work, family, health, and/or economics" (p. 43). Schlossberg has developed a theoretical

framework for use in counseling adults who are experiencing transition (1981, 1984, 1989). An individual's response to transition is viewed by Schlossberg (1984) "as a process of continuing and changing reactions over time--for better or for worse--which are linked to the individual's continuous and changing appraisal of self-in-situation" (p. 56). An individual in transition "passes through a series of phases (or stages) of assimilation, a process of moving from total preoccupation with the transition to integration of the transition into his or her life" (p. 56).

Schlossberg's framework provides a way to predict the ability of an individual to cope with a transition experience. An individual's "coping resources" are based upon a balance between the assets and the liabilities surrounding the situation. Schlossberg's model divides an individual's coping resources into three major divisions which are characteristics of the transition itself, the characteristics of the individual experiencing the change, and the characteristics of the environment in which the transition has occurred.

The investigator was reminded of Schlossberg's concept of coping resources as several factors affecting the adaptation of a parent or a student to a grade level retention emerged during the data analysis of the interviews. These emergent factors included coping

resources from all three divisions of Schlossberg's framework--the individual, the transition, and the environment. Characteristics of an individual relevant to the assimilation of a retention included the self-definition of an individual, previous experience with retention, and the retention philosophy of the individual. Characteristics surrounding the nonpromotion experience which contributed to the assimilation of the retention included the feelings of empowerment connected to the decision and the retention rationale. Characteristics of the environment which affected the adaptation to a nonpromotion included the sense of belonging to the school community and the support systems available to an individual. The factor which will be discussed in detail in this paper is retention philosophy.

Retention Philosophy. One coping resource available to individuals adapting to the transition of retention was retention philosophy. The retention philosophy of individuals within a family where a retention had occurred was made up of their beliefs and attitudes regarding the educational use of nonpromotion. The following two issues surfaced during the interview process: if and when retention should occur and whether or not retention helps or hurts a child.

When, if ever, should retention occur? Surprisingly, no one participating in the study, regardless of personal

feelings about the retention touching his/her own immediate family, felt the practice of grade level retention should be totally abandoned by the public schools. Retention was seen as a justifiable practice by the schools because of a lack of grade level knowledge or because of failing grades on a report card. What follows are several comments made by parents regarding deficiency in student knowledge.

> I, I feel like, like I felt like then if they haven't learned it during this year, it's going to catch up with 'em eventually. You know, going on to the next grade if they have, it's, it's steps, you know. If they don't know their ABC's, they're not going to learn to read, you know. And uh, that's just one of those things that's, that would have to be done. I mean that's the way I felt with A. If he doesn't know it now, he's definitely not going to know it next year when it's one step harder. And, uh, I mean if there's nothing to build on.

> I explained to him that I didn't feel that he had the, the knowledge to go on and that I felt that he could get stronger by repeating the grade.
> I mean why send them to another grade when they don't know what they were doing in the grade before that?

> I didn't think we should push him on to the fourth grade when he wasn't ready 'cause that just, you know, defeat the purpose, I think.

> I don't begrudge N. being retained one bit because he wasn't ready. I mean he would just failed harder when he got up here if he'd went on in to second. I don't think he would have picked it up.

> I mean we kind of felt that it was the best, but even though the teacher said, 'She could go; I think she could go, but I think she'll have trouble towards the end of the year.' I said, 'Well, if she's going to have trouble we just going ahead and stop it now.'

Parents felt very strongly that grade level material should be mastered before a student was allowed to pass along to the next grade level.

Passing grades were often equated with a mastery of grade level knowledge; therefore, a second justification for retention was poor grades. As evidenced by some of the quotes above, parents often felt students are just not ready to go to the next level of learning. Sometimes, however, failing grades were attributed to a lack of effort on the part of the student. Parent comments regarding failing grades follow.

> I think that's one problem with high schools, if they don't have the grades they still pass them, and I think that is wrong. When you, uh, graduate students that can't fill out a job application then I think that's the school's fault.
>
> I think he's [the retained child] learning the consequences of not doing the work, and, uh, and he does work hard for his grades [now].
>
> Well, I believe it [retention] is [justified] when children just don't want to do anything. They don't try. They don't even, don't care. I believe that's the way it should be, and when they make real, real bad grades on the grade card.
>
> I don't begrudge it. Evidently, I wasn't doing the work so I paid my dues. . . So it's just, I'm not trying to be hard, but he's got to realize, you know, do your decent on your grades and show your effort and then you get what you should get, that's the only way I know how to do it.

Parents believed that students who worked hard and were successful in their studies were rewarded with good report cards. Conversely, parents felt that placing students in

the next grade level when they had not been successful in the current grade would send the wrong message to students. Good grades should not be given to students but should be earned.

Students, like their parents in the study, also felt retention was a justifiable educational practice. What follows are some student comments describing situations when they believed retention should occur.

> Well, if he had bad grades, I'd say it's fine with me and all [to retain]. And then if he start, if he had good grades I'd say well, um, let him go on to the next grade.

> Like you might, like say that first year you go ahead and pass or something and next year you might go on to second grade and not know nothing at all and then they'd like wonder how you got to the second grade if you don't know nothing at all.

> They [students] need it so they can have a better life to go on. . . When they make poor grade they need [retention].

> I think that if kids, if, if somebody didn't learn what they were suppose to learn in the eighth grade or

> whatever, they should be held back, you know, but it seems like they ought to help you out some, like they should have let me to [go] to summer school like they told me that I had to to pass, but I didn't.
>
> Well, this is the way I look at it, you know. . . I think every kid at the end of the year, every year, I think like they should put everything, everything together like what they've learned that whole year like in one big packet and let 'em study it, you know, a little bit or let 'em study it for two or three weeks, and then give 'em a test, and, you know, if they've learned enough or what they should've learned or if see, uh, they've just been goofing off or something like that, I think they should be held back 'cause it ain't right for some students they hold back that know they can go on.

Like their parents, the students in the study believed in mastery of grade level material. They also believed that students needed to demonstrate their mastery of this material either through passing grades or through testing.

The second attitude making up the retention philosophy of the participants within the study was the belief of whether or not retention "helps" or "hurts" a student. A person's justification for nonpromotion tended to reflect

their beliefs about the general use of the practice; an individual's attitude about the effect retention has on children, however, was more likely the result of how they believed the experience had either helped or hurt someone in their own family. Comments from parents follow.

> I requested that she be held back because I thought it would benefit her more than to just be pushed along then not learn anything.

> To me I think that, you know, if, if the teacher decides that and if they work together all during the year then the teacher still decides that then that the child should be retained because in the long run it would help the child. But if let your child just keep going on and on, and you know deep down in your heart that they're not doing the work they should be doing that it's not, in the long run it's not going to help them 'cause when they get to high school if you don't know your elementary work then. . . when time comes to graduate you're child's not going to graduate. So if you care anything and you love your child, you're doing it for them. It's to help them.

> I feel that, uh, she is right where she needs to be. Those two years has helped her to catch up, to say, the

> ninth grade. And, uh, it's still like a year behind that she has matured enough as far as school and herself where I think she's where she needs to be right now. I don't think it's [retention's] hurt her at all because she needed those extra years to mature to have time to grow up to those children 'cause she was just not ready. And, you know, it just wasn't me saying it, it was everybody saying it.

Although most parents felt retention had helped their child, there were a few parents who remember that the retention had caused their child stress. One parent who believed retention had not helped her child shared the following comments.

> I've seen how bad that's it has been on 'em so far, the year that they both were retained, it was hard on 'em, and I don't want to see 'em go through that again. . . A. cried. A cried. She said, 'Well, there goes my friends. They're going on to another grade.' She had to make all new friends in the next grade, and, uh, they laughed at her and made fun of her because she had failed. I really, I want my child to learn, but, uh--no, I don't like for 'em to be retained.

The majority of the parent participants viewed retention as an educational practice that provided students with a better chance for future success in school. Did

students feel the same way? The following are comments made by students about retention and the effect retention has on children.

> They [teachers at school] can sort of say this, this [retention] will just help you more if you stay back so you can learn all this over so you can be better at it and maybe even be smarter than the people that did pass so that you get that stuff that they taught you in your head.

> In a way, I'm glad momma held me back 'cause, uh, I mean, I really didn't really done nothing really, and I'm glad she held me back 'cause I knew a lot more, and some of it in third grade was just reviews of second grade.
>
> It wasn't a benefit that I lost a lot of my friends . . . [Retention has given me] a better life. . . Ummm, it's just got me interested, I never did even like racing 'till after retention. I started getting interested in sports and everything.

Very few students acknowledged that their retention experience had adversely affected lives.

Conclusions and Discussions

An individual's retention philosophy seems to be comprised of two main types of attitudes. The first

attitude that was expressed was that nonpromotion is justified as an educational strategy. All individuals in the study felt that there were some circumstances in which retention was justified; this attitude was a general statement of belief and not necessarily an endorsement of the retention decision affecting their own lives. Acceptable reasons for retention centered around two areas, a student has either not acquired sufficient knowledge to move on to the next grade level or he/she has not made passing grades. Some parents felt that poor grades were a reflection of a student not trying hard enough to pass.

The second attitude making up an individual's retention philosophy relates to the issue of whether or not retention helps a student on a long term basis. Most parents felt that the retention decision made for their child was a benefit to the child. In the long run, the child would be better off in school by getting "caught up" on those skills for which he/she were deficient. Looking back on their retention, a majority of the students also felt the retention had aided their progress in school.

The retention philosophy of the participants served as one coping resource aiding in their adaptation to retention. By justifying the continuation of retention as an educational practice, these individuals were able to validate their own nonpromotion experience. Validation of

the retention experience helped to relieve parents (who had often participated in the retention decision) of feelings of guilt. Retained students who were able to affirm the positive outcome of their own nonpromotion were able to maintain a more positive self image. Additionally, an admission of negative feelings regarding their own retention could seem like a betrayal of their parents--parents who may have told the students that their retention was for their own good.

Retention philosophy is just one factor that emerged from an inductive analysis of the data. As a coping resource for individuals dealing with retention, however, the factor is particularly significant to educators. At a time when educational researchers are reinforcing the finding that retention is not of long term educational benefit, the general public still clings to an opposing belief. In a national poll, 72% of the American public favor rigid grade promotion standards (Gallup, 1986).

The investigator believes the persistence in viewing retention as an educational necessity stems from the fact that educators continue to place students in a rigid, grade level curriculum and continue to assess their progress by using developmentally inappropriate grading practices. When students are unsuccessful in this type of classroom setting, what other alternatives are available to parents desperate

to see their child succeed? One parent recalled the desperation she and her husband had felt over their son's failing grades and told the investigator,

> Well, we lost a lot of sleep, and we shed a lot of tears because when those report cards came home that were straight F's. . . there were seemingly nothing we could do. . . to make him do better in school.

Any parent who sees "straight F's" on a child's report card is going to consider retention a more viable option than sending him/her on to be equally unsuccessful in the next grade.

If educators want to eliminate the practice of retention, administrators will have to do more than write policy which limits its use. A much more fundamental change is required. With the adoption of more developmentally appropriate practices and curricula (Bredekamp, 1987), educators could remove much unnecessary stress placed upon families and better meet the individual needs of students. Only then will public sentiment begin to change.

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